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A federal bill would require school boards to establish a policy allowing teachers to search students they suspect of carrying drugs or weapons.

The Student and Teacher Safety Act passed the House on a voice vote in the fall, but the American Civil Liberties Union and National School Boards Association oppose the bill, which they say violates students' civil rights.

The most vocal critics of the proposal have called it a "strip search bill."

Lawmakers say the bill would help protect students and teachers and shield staff members who search students from being sued.

Locally, the issue of what constitutes a legal search of students came to the forefront last month when a Larkin High School parent claimed staff members there improperly searched her daughter, whom they accused of hiding stolen money.

Elgin Area School District U-46 staff said teachers followed district policy, and Elgin police cleared Larkin of wrongdoing.

District policy allows school officials to search lockers, desks, parking lots and other school property and equipment for illegal drugs or weapons. Searches may be general and random, and students should have no expectation of privacy in those areas, according to U-46 policy.

The policy does not specify if or when a staff member may search a student, though it does allow staff to "pursue reasonable and proper questioning of students when there is concern regarding safety, or hazard or other impropriety."

The federal law would require schools put in place policies permitting full-time staff members and teachers to search students on school grounds if the search is done to ensure the school remains free of weapons or illegal drugs.

Schools that fail to comply with the law would risk losing a portion of their federal funding.

Though the U-46 policy does not specifically reference student searches, U-46 Safety Coordinator John Heiderscheidt said he believes district policy already complies with the requirements of the proposed law.

If the law passed, U-46 would make its policy more specific, if necessary, Heiderscheidt said.

Legislators who supported the bill emphasized it does not dictate what the policy must entail, thereby giving schools and states the freedom to draft their own language.

But the ACLU has said the proposed law is not specific enough and gives school boards too much latitude to violate students' rights to privacy and freedom from unreasonable search and seizures.

In a letter to Congress, the ACLU charged the legislation would "further create a jail-like environment (in schools) by subjecting students to searches similar to those that would be conducted in prisons."

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, who co-sponsored the bill, cited recent cases of school violence to support its passage.

"I trust the judgment of education professionals who should have complete discretion to ensure their classrooms are drug- and gun-free," the Highland Park Republican said in a statement.

The Senate has received a copy of the bill and referred it to committee.